

MATL GETS GREEN LIGHT

By Karl Puckett

The state of Montana has given the green light to a high-voltage transmission line that could trigger millions in green energy production in northcentral Montana.

The 600 megawatts of north-south capacity on the Montana Alberta Tie Line has been sold to NaturEner, Invenergy and Wind Hunter.

"It's clear to us they are desperate for available transmission," said CEO Johan van't Hof of Toronto-based Tonbridge Power Co., the developer.

Markets on the West Coast are "clamoring for clean energy," he added.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer announced Wednesday the state Department of Environmental Quality had approved a certificate of compliance allowing Tonbridge to build the line, which would stretch 214 miles between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Alberta.

That leaves one remaining permit from the U.S. Department of Energy. Van't Hoff is hopeful for a decision from the DOE by the first week of November, he said.

"Thank you for investing your dollars in Montana," Schweitzer told van't Hof at the announcement in Helena.

Schweitzer, noting the state's wind output has jumped from 1 megawatt to 271 megawatts in four years, said MATL would lead to an additional 600 megawatts of wind development in the Golden Triangle and a billion dollars in investment.

NaturEner already is constructing the 140-turbine, 210 megawatt Glacier Wind Farm 85 miles north of Great Falls. That project will utilize existing transmission, but the company has said a large expansion is likely once MATL is built.

The company has purchased all of the north-bound capacity.

Construction won't begin for six months because it will take that long to manufacture the steel poles, which are 90 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter, van't Hof said. Part of the line will also have wooden H-frame poles.

In announcing Montana's approval Wednesday, Schweitzer said a landowner liaison team would be created to address landowner concerns. Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone, a Democrat, will serve on the team, as will Rep. Llew Jones, R-Conrad, and Tonbridge executives.

A group of Canadian landowners is challenging the project in court.

"Our staff worked very hard to balance the legitimate concerns of local landowners with our need for the transmission of this vast source of renewable energy," said Richard Oppen, DEQ director.

The company will pay fair market value for 105-foot right-of-way easements, make annual rent payments and pay for any crops damaged during construction, van't Hof said.

The company has invested \$55 million in the project so far, he said. The remaining cost of constructing the line is \$125 million, he said.

Tonbridge will take out a \$90 million loan from a bank while customers who will use the line have pre-paid \$35 million, he said.

The company will save \$3 million a year in property taxes thanks to tax incentives promoting green energy, which were approved by the 2007 Legislature.